



Ramadan: A Guide

An Introduction



Ramadan, the ninth month in the Muslim calendar¹, is a special time for the Muslim community. As a most blessed month, it is a time for reflection, prayer and renewal of faith. Muslims worldwide fast from dawn to sunset, abstaining totally from food, drink, smoking and other sensual pleasures to complete one of the five pillars of Islam and to achieve greater self-discipline, self-purification, and compassion for those less fortunate.

One Islam – Many Muslims

Though Islam is a single religion, it is important to recognise that Muslim people are not a single homogenous group. There are approximately +500,000 Muslims in Australia, who have come from over 70 countries all around the world: from Europe (ie Albania, Bosnia, Turkey), Africa, Asia (including Central Asia, South Asia, South East Asia), Pacific Islands, and North and South America. Muslims believe in the one God. Allah is the Arabic word for God, and Muslims believe in all the Prophets including Jesus, Moses, Abraham and others including Muhammad, peace be upon them.

What is Ramadan

A: Ramadan is the fourth pillar of Islam, which every Muslim must endeavor to observe or fulfill. The others pillars are:

- (i) *Shahadah* – declaration of faith;
- (ii) *Salat* – the five daily prayers;
- (iii) *Zakat* – Purification of wealth by the charitable donation of 2.5% of annual savings;
- (iv) *Hajj* – Pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, obligatory once in a lifetime for those who are

Q: How did the fast during Ramadan become obligatory for Muslims?

A: The revelations from God to Prophet Muhammad that would eventually be compiled as the Qur'an began during Ramadan in the year 610 A.D., but the fast of Ramadan did not become a religious obligation for Muslims until the year 624 A.D. The obligation to



fast is explained in the second chapter of the Qur'an: "O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint...Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an, as guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting..." (2: 183 & 185)

Q: Why does Ramadan begin on a different day each year?

A: Because Ramadan is a lunar month, it begins about eleven days earlier each year. Throughout a Muslim's lifetime, Ramadan will fall both during winter months, when the days are short, and summer months, when the days are long and the fast is more challenging. In this way, the fast is evenly distributed between Muslims living in the northern and southern hemispheres. In Australia, the Australian National Imams Council is the peak religious body which decides the start and end of Ramadan for Australian Muslims.

Q: What do Muslims believe they gain from fasting?

A:

- **Compassion** – When one does not eat or drink at all during the day, you feel in your body what the poor and hungry go through. Thus social responsibility is introduced into one's conscience through religious acts.
- **Renewed focus on spirituality** – During Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to engage their time in reading the Qur'an and offering extra prayers at night.
- **Character building** – In the state of fasting, anti social habits are forbidden. E.g. backbiting, indulging in foul speech, telling of lies, losing one's temper, etc. Perhaps the greatest practical benefit is the annual lesson in self-restraint, patience and discipline that can carry forward to other aspects of a Muslim's life such as work and education. Abstention from food is only one step to make a man realise that if he can, in obedience to Divine injunctions, abstain from that which is otherwise lawful, how more necessary it is that he should abstain from that which is evil and temptation.



- **Social interaction** – Muslims are encouraged to share their food with family, friends and neighbours during the time they break their fast

Note: Those who are temporarily unable to fast must make up the missed days at another time or feed the poor an average full meal or its value per person per day.

Q: Is not eating and drinking all day for 15 hours or more during summer harmful to the body?

A: According to health studies, fasting is practically the most powerful of all remedial measures. It enables one to get rid of toxins, which may have accumulated within the body; it purifies the blood stream and renovates the entire system. While purifying and cleansing the body, fasting, at the same time, adds to the actual vital strength of the body, by removing toxic material which can weaken the nerves of the body and the cells of the various organs.

Q: Does a person's strength reduce due to not eating or drinking in the day?

A: Missing a few meals is not the same as starvation. In the study of the body and its needs and of foods and their purpose, scientists have since long proved that food energy is not immediately available, that some of this is stored in and upon the body as and when needed at a later time.

Q: Do people normally lose weight during Ramadan?

A: Some people do lose weight, but others may not. It is recommended that meals eaten during Ramadan be light, but most people can't resist sampling special sweets and foods associated with Ramadan.

Q: Who Must Fast?

A: Fasting is compulsory for those who are mentally and physically fit, past the age of puberty, in a settled situation (not travelling), and are sure fasting is unlikely to cause real physical or mental injury.

Q. Are there any exemptions from fasting in the month of Ramadan?

A: Yes. The following are exempt from fasting (some exemptions are optional):

- Children under the age of puberty and discretion.
- People who are mentally incapacitated or not responsible for their actions.
- The elderly who are too old and feeble.
- The sick.
- Travellers who are on journeys of more than about fifty miles.
- Pregnant women and nursing mothers.
- Women who are menstruating (days missed are made up later).

Q. What are the times of fasting?

A: A Muslim who intends to fast rises an hour or two before dawn and has an early breakfast. All eating and drinking must cease approximately one and half-hours before sunrise which is the start of the fasting period. The fast is broken at the time of sundown, traditionally with dates and water, followed by the main meal after prayers. Fasting times vary from one time zone to another. In Melbourne, it may start as early as 3:45 am, depending on the time of the year. The times vary each day.

Q: How can non-Muslim co-workers and friends help someone who is fasting?

A: Employers, co-workers and teachers can help by understanding the significance of Ramadan and by showing a willingness to make minor allowances for its physical demands. Special consideration can be given to such things as requests for vacation time, the need for flexible early morning or evening work schedules and lighter homework assignments.

Try to avoid the following for your Muslim colleagues:

- (i) meetings which include lunch;
- (ii) meetings extending past 5pm; and
- (iii) departments parties (or social events) during Ramadan.

It is also very important that Muslim workers and students be given time to attend Eid-ul-Fitr prayers at the end of Ramadan. Eid-ul-Fitr is the day of rejoicing for Muslims to mark the end of the fasting month. It is as important to Muslims as Christmas and Yom Kippur are to Christians and Jews.

If invited to share in Iftar (or the breaking of the fast), try to make it...it will be fun!

Q. What are some of the traditional practices of Ramadan?

- A:**
- Breaking the daily fast with a drink of water and dates. Main meal to follow after dusk prayers.
 - Reading the entire Qur'an during Ramadan.
 - Acts of charity
 - Offering additional prayers early morning and at night in the home or in a congregation at the mosque
 - Social visits are encouraged, especially visiting the sick and elderly.

Q. I am travelling (to and from) or working in a Muslim Country – what should I know?

A: You should note the following things:

- Holiday traffic jams (to Muslim countries) begin a week before the end of Ramadan and three days following Eid.
- Traffic jams are common before Iftar – beware of being grid-locked.
- Congestion occurs on flights to Saudi Arabia especially during the 2nd half of Ramadan – people visiting Mecca.
- Working hours in some countries may be reduced, and finish earlier during Ramadan – so plan accordingly.
- Restaurants may be booked out around Iftar – so plan ahead.
- Some food outlets may be closed during the day – however many shops/markets etc will be open to late – way past midnight – enjoy the festivities.

Q. What is Eid-ul-Fitr?

A: This is the feast marking the end of Ramadan. Muslims are obliged to pay a prescribed amount of money to assist the poor and disadvantaged (called Zakat-ul-Fitr). Muslims observe the following:

- Attend Eid prayers in the morning
- Visiting family, friends, neighbors, the sick, elderly
- Enjoying festive meals
- Modest gift-giving especially to children

Ramadan Buzzwords

- **Iftar:** The traditional sundown meal that breaks the Ramadan fast observed by Muslims around the world this month. The event begins with a call to the maghreb (evening) prayers by a local imam, followed by a prayer.
- **Ramadan Mubarak:** Arabic for “May your Ramadan be blessed.” Some may say “Ramadan Kareem.”
- **Sahoor:** The meal one eats in the early hours of the morning before starting one’s fast.
- **Eid Mubarak:** A greeting pronounced (eedmoobar- ak), meaning “May you have a blessed Eid”

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